

## *Conspiracy theories in the time of Covid-19*

Clare Birchall and Peter Knight

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### **Robin Ramsay**

**B**irchall is new to me<sup>1</sup> but Professor Peter Knight has been in these columns before. Almost 20 years ago Anthony Frewin reviewed Knight's *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to The X-Files*.<sup>2</sup> Frewin was irritated by the author's assumption that those pursuing what-happened-on-Dealey-Plaza are conspiracy theorists. Mostly they aren't; and the assumption by Knight (and other academics in the field) that 'conspiracy theory' is an uncomplicated concept and anything so labelled can be assumed to be nonsense, is irrational and insulting (to JFK buffs in particular). However, with the spectacular crop of really dumb conspiracy theories which have emerged in recent years in the English-speaking world – QAnon etc. and the various Covid-linked theories – Knight and Birchall have a field in which they can assume that the content is false and can be ignored.

Behind their recent research is a view – I presume Knight's – of conspiracy theories in society:

As we have noted in our previous work (Knight 2000), there has been a postmodern turn in conspiracy culture since at the least the late 1960s, with conspiracy theories becoming the stuff of popular entertainment as much as serious politics. However, this postmodern turn to commodified, ludic and ironic forms of conspiracism has quickened pace in the last decade, most emblematically with the rise of QAnon. Conspiracy theories now operate in a gamified mode, treating the emerging relations of the imagined conspiracy as a media spectacle . . .

I had to google 'ludic' – showing spontaneous and undirected playfulness; and used it to check 'gamified' – as you might guess, applying 'typical elements of game playing'. But only a small minority of contemporary conspiracy theories,

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<sup>1</sup> See <<https://conspiracytheories.eu/member/dr-clare-birchall/>>.

<sup>2</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/23xyknmm>> or <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/article/issue/46/conspiracy-culture-from-the-kennedy-assassination-to-the-x-files/>>

Knight is currently editor-in-chief of a series of academic studies of conspiracy theories for Routledge.

on the fringe of the QAnon fantasies, could be described as playful.

And what about 'since at least the late 1960s'. I presume they mean at least as far back as the late 1960s. But conspiracy theories did not 'become the stuff of popular entertainment' in the late 1960s. The authors themselves acknowledge this, writing on p. 128 of 'the 1970s-1990s when conspiracist content needed to be sought out in obscure and esoteric zines'.<sup>3</sup> It was the world-wide success of *The X-Files* (first series 1993) in publicising some of the conspiracy theories in the USA which led to TV programmes imitating it and a shoal of books<sup>4</sup> and magazines using material related to the programme's content. But that boom didn't last long: most of the films<sup>5</sup> and TV programmes were failures, the magazines all went bust within a year or two, and the book publishing seemed to peter out. Without the arrival of the Net, I suspect the conspiratorial content of *The X-Files* would have remained in little magazines such as Kenn Thomas's *Steamshovel*.<sup>6</sup>

The second major plank in the underlying thesis is this:

. . . the coronavirus pandemic has not caused a sudden, unanticipated rush of conspiracy theorising, but it has given an urgency and prominence to existing narratives that – in a process familiar to historians of conspiracy theories – have been adapted for new purposes.  
(p. 11)

I think this is partially true. The true bit is that the basic structure of the major conspiracy theories in the Anglo-American world – the 'existing narratives' – has always been that some secret group/individual is really running things behind the facade of democracy. Over time the identity of the master manipulator changes: the Illuminati, the Jews, the communists, the Masons, Bilderberg, the Council on Foreign Relations, George Soros. With the current crop of Covid theories we have been offered new identities for the players behind the curtain: for example Bill Gates, the Global Economic Forum (Davos) and the big pharmaceutical corporations.

The untrue bit is the claim that 'the coronavirus pandemic has not caused a sudden, unanticipated rush of conspiracy theorising'. Oh yes it has; and it is inexplicable that our authors wish to deny this. For the first time that I am

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<sup>3</sup> Did anyone edit this book? No-one is credited as editor in the authors' preamble.

<sup>4</sup> For example, two anthologies from Steamshovel Press, *Popular Alienation* (1995) and *Popular Paranoia* (2002) and three large volumes of essays edited by Russ Kick: *You Are Being Lied To* (2001), *Everything You Know is Wrong* (2002) and *Abuse Your Illusions* (2003).

<sup>5</sup> Notable exception being the 1996 *Conspiracy Theory* with Julia Roberts and Mel Gibson.

<sup>6</sup> *Steamshovel's* later incarnations bore the legend 'all conspiracy, no theory'.

aware of in my lifetime, conspiracy theories have led to street demonstrations all over the western world.

Apparently contradicting their previous statement, our authors write that the Covid pandemic has produced:

'a coming together of various technological, political and social factors that have contributed to something resembling a perfect storm of conspiracy theory and misinformation'. (p. 15)

There were 'conspiracy entrepreneurs' – most obviously Alex Jones – putting out any old crap to make money from the *schmucks* who buy products advertised on their programmes. But most important is the technological factor – the Net, without which none of this would have happened; specifically social media, what has been called "disinformation capitalism" . . . the content-agnostic monetisation techniques that help platforms retain user attention and accumulate their data'. (p. 23) But at this point we really ought to make the obvious distinction between the Covid-based theories and those about the 'deep state' which flowed into the QAnonsense. The 'deep state' allegations came from the Republican Party's supporters as tools for use against Hilary Clinton before the 2016 presidential election – all that 'drain the swamp' talk. As the authors note, these allegations were boosted and legitimised by sections of the broadcast media on the American right, notably Fox News, which gave air time to some of the theories – and by then presidential candidate, later president, Trump. (p. 129) It is unclear to what extent Donald Trump's erratic comments on Covid in its early stages legitimised the vaccine sceptics.

How this 'perfect storm of conspiracy theory and misinformation' developed, and who believes and transmits what, especially in the United States, are now being studied by a small army of academics whose work the authors discuss. Who believes conspiracy theories? The social psychologists are on the case, show our authors. We could use the book-length study of Belief in Conspiracy Theories Inventory,<sup>7</sup> the Generic Conspiracist Belief Scale<sup>8</sup> or the Conspiracy Mentality Scale. This last is one of 26 papers on conspiracy theories and who believes them at one site.<sup>9</sup>

Despite telling us that in March 2020 30% of Americans believed Covid-19

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<sup>7</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/yc52ksnj>> or <<https://www.bartleby.com/essay/Analysis-The-Belief-In-Conspiracy-Theories-Inventory-FJ95E5HHC2T>>

<sup>8</sup> Some details at <<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32191741/>>.

<sup>9</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/3kftda98>> or <<https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Conspiracy-Mentality-Scale-Stojanov-Halberstadt/2d4b83091b7b1c77750e3c3f5f280cdfa1292e0e?sort=relevance>>

was 'purposefully created and released by powerful people as part of a conspiracy', (p. 54) the authors conclude one chapter by stating:

'It is far from clear whether the coronavirus epidemic constitutes an unprecedented situation, with previously unseen levels of conspiracy theories in circulation and concomitant belief.' (p. 65)

*Huh?* The large academic industry whose recent work is discussed by the authors – not to mention the existence of their book – rests on the existence of 'previously unseen levels of conspiracy theories in circulation and concomitant belief'.

What has been happening is straightforward. Many people, especially the young and poorly educated,<sup>10</sup> use the Net to to get much of their information and spread their ignorance and intellectual incompetence. Creating 'bubble communities' in which people only encounter views similar to their own, social media apps might have been designed to generate nonsense.<sup>11</sup> Without states taking control of the algorithms of these apps – and this won't happen in the foreseeable future in the democratic West – social media will continue to create networks of people who never need to deal with evidence refuting their beliefs.<sup>12</sup>

Our authors can't resist the occasional lapse into academic guff. There's this on p. 128.

It also encouraged the miscegenation of scientifically rooted hypothesis and conspiracist hermeneutics in online discourse. If ontological flatness in Actor Network Theory indicates a radical equivalence between humans and non-human agents in the assessment of any network, we can fashion the situation under discussion as epistemological flatness, whereby knowledge and knowing practices with very different provenances and protocols become intertwined in ways that make it hard to make decision about their veracity or helpfulness.

Even so, even with the post-modernist flourishes, there's a good deal of interesting material in this, particularly on the role of social media in the creation of conspiratorial thinking. The fact that a substantial minority of the citizens of the UK and USA – and by no means all are dummies – profess not

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<sup>10</sup> 'young people and the less well educated are more likely to get their news and information from social media' – p. 51.

<sup>11</sup> Sue Greenwood at <<https://tinyurl.com/y2p3lb82>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/27/how-qanons-conspiracies-gained-traction-uk-social-media>>.

<sup>12</sup> The politicians are aware of the problem. William Hague talked about it in his *Times* column on 6 December.

to trust medical science is significant. I have to write 'profess' because, as the authors point out, a significant proportion of the vaccine sceptics or vaccine conspiracists did, in the end, accept jabs from the evil medical empire to which they were, apparently, opposed. So perhaps, when push comes to shove, the official medical view of reality still prevails. But for how long?

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